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Postscript WETA Kills 'Newsroom'

By Judith Martin

"Newsroom," the WETA showpiece news analysis program, was killed yesterday, despite assurances from the Ford Foundation that Washington's educational television station will receive "much larger" funding than it has had in previous years.

Station president Donald Taverner, noting the station was experiencing general financial difficulties, said the money could be better spent elsewhere. "Newsroom" costs over a million dollars a year, and Taverner said substantial funds are needed for a planned move to a new building and improvement of technical facilities.

The staff, including Editor Victor W. Maerki and some 25 reporters and technical people, were told yesterday. "At the moment, it looks as if we won't be able to absorb any of them," Taverner said later in the day.

"The station has had serious financial problems, and we're doing our best to help them," David Davis of the Ford Foundation said yesterday. He stressed that Ford did not suggest the killing of "Newsroom" and in fact had provided funds enough to continue it if WETA officials decided to spend the money in that way.

Over the last two years

Ford has given \$2.40 million to support "Newsroom," as well as \$80,000 for another locally-produced news-oriented program, "Thirty Minutes With ..."

The new and larger grant, the amount of which has not been disclosed, is not earmarked for any particular show. WETA officials, however, had applied for a specific renewal for "Newsroom" and had publicly pledged its continuance on whether or not that special grant came through.

In making its new grant general, Ford left WETA flexibility of operation and avoided any possible criticism for attempting to influence programming by specifically rejecting or approving funding for "Newsroom." In effect, Ford threw responsibility for deciding "Newsroom's" fate back to WETA management.

"It was up to them (WETA)," Davis said flatly yesterday. "It was not our decision."

In his statement announcing "Newsroom's" demise,

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effective Oct. 23, Taverner said. "We are in the initial planning of community programs for that time slot certainly to include local news and public affairs presentations."

This would probably mean more use of studio discussions with news figures, rather than the more expensive and complicated "Newsroom" method of original reporting and roundtable discussion coupled with the use of film and other graphics. The "Newsroom" slot is 6 to 6:30 p.m. with a 10 to 10:30 p.m. repeat on Channel 26.

The program has had three editors and several format changes—increasing its emphasis on the local scene—since it went on the air on March 23, 1970. It closely patterned after "Newsroom" programs in other cities such as San Francisco and Dallas.

Last May the program here was cut back from an hour to half an hour, although recent Ford Foundation-commissioned critiques of the program were generally favorable.